

First records of South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki* for Ghana

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Premières observations du Labbe de McCormick *Stercorarius maccormicki* au Ghana. Plusieurs grands labbes on été observés pendant des inventaires de faune maritime au large du Ghana en mai 2013 et avril 2014. À trois occasions les oiseaux ont été photographiés et identifiés comme des Labbes de McCormick *Stercorarius maccormicki*. Il s'agit des premières données confirmées pour le Ghana. Les dates de ces observations en deux années consécutives indiquent que les Labbes de McCormick traversent le Golfe de Guinée lors de leur migration vers le nord.

During 18 April–31 May 2013 and 26 March–26 May 2014, marine fauna observations were undertaken in Ghanaian waters on board a geophysical survey vessel. The survey areas were located 45–65 km off the Ghanaian coast in 2013 and 20–80 km off the Ghanaian coast in 2014, in which year the survey also entered the waters of Côte d'Ivoire (Fig. 1). During these studies, four large skuas *Stercorarius* sp. were observed.

On 12 May 2013 at 07:57 hrs, JTS observed a large skua (skua 1) circling the vessel c.59 km from the Ghanaian coast (04°31'52"N 03°08'09"W). Aware of the complexity of identifying members of this genus to species level, he concentrated

on obtaining some photographs (Figs. 2–3). The weather was fine with slight cloud cover, facilitating good visibility in excess of 5 km. Wind was eight knots from the south and as a result Beaufort sea state was three with a low swell (<2 m). The sea surface temperature (SST) was 30.1°C and the water depth at this location was 1,345 m.

Another large skua (skua 2) was observed by JTS on 26 May, at 18:03 hrs, 60.7 km from the coast. Due to low light levels the photographs do not show any clear identification features.

Almost a year later, on 25 April 2014 at 11:01 hrs, MdB observed a large skua (skua 3) briefly circling the vessel c.60 km from the Ghanaian



Figure 1. Map showing the study area off Ghana and the positions of the large skuas observed in 2013 (skuas 1–2) and 2014 (skuas 3–5). Skuas 1, 3 and 4 were subsequently identified as South Polar Skuas *Stercorarius maccormicki*.

Carte indiquant la zone d'étude au large du Ghana et les positions des grands labbes observés en 2013 (labbes 1–2) et 2014 (labbes 3–5). Labbes 1, 3 et 4 ont par la suite été identifiés comme des Labbes de McCormick *Stercorarius maccormicki*.



Figures 2–3. South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki* (skua 1), off Ghana, 12 May 2013 (James T. Saulino)
 Labbe de McCormick *Stercorarius maccormicki* (labbe 1), au large du Ghana, 12 mai 2013 (James T. Saulino)

coast (04°32'13"N 03°09'18"W). The bird landed on the water near a patch of *Sargassum natans* algae, where it remained for a few minutes before flying west (Figs. 4–5). Cloud cover was slight and visibility was in excess of 5 km. Wind was 12 knots from the south-west, Beaufort sea state was four and the swell was low (<2 m). SST was 29.5°C and the water depth 1,572 m. Just over one hour later, at 12.17 hrs and 51.3 km from the coast, JTS photographed a large skua (skua 4), presumably the same individual as skua 3 (Figs. 6–7).

Two days later, on 27 April, MdB observed a large skua (skua 5) passing the vessel at close range 23.9 km off the coast on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) border between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The sighting was very brief and due to very low light levels photographs could not be taken.

Identification

The identification of *Stercorarius* species is often problematic, especially when involving birds sighted at low latitudes. Moulting has been advocated as a useful tool for separating South Polar Skua *S. maccormicki* from Great Skua *S. skua* if the bird in question is correctly aged (Newell *et al.* 2013). Ageing is generally possible by careful observation of plumage coloration and pattern, in combination with leg colour, primary shape and primary wear. The breeding seasons of the two species differ by c.6 months, but the moulting

periods of adults of each species overlap broadly with those of second-calendar-year (first-cycle) birds (Newell *et al.* 2013). Birds of the entire 'Brown Skua' *S. antarcticus* complex are similar in appearance to South Polar Skua, but are chunkier with a slimmer bill, smaller head, and have slightly shorter legs.

Skua 1

Skua 1 (Figs. 2–3) has striking white patches at the base of primaries, visible above and below, a relatively dark head with a paler, greyish, nuchal collar, and a white blaze above the bill base. The broad tail is short with no sign of elongated central feathers. The upperparts are brown with pale feather edges on the wing and mantle; the underparts are brown with paler flanks. The dark bill and head do not appear very large for the size of the bird. The feet and legs were not seen and are not visible in the photographs.

The size and proportions observed show that skua 1 is larger and bulkier than Pomarine Skua *S. pomarinus*. An adult Great Skua is eliminated by the lack of characteristic streaking on the scapulars. A second-calendar-year Great Skua would show pale golden scapulars and back feathers in May. Furthermore, a young Great Skua has an obvious hood. The bird in question has not started its primary moult, but it has commenced to moult the outer secondaries, whereas all second-calendar-year Great Skuas are in active primary moult at this time of year. The primaries do not



Figure 4–7. South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki*, off Ghana, 25 April 2014 (Figs. 4–5: skua 3, Marijke N. de Boer; Figs. 6–7: skua 4, James T. Saulino)

Labbe de McCormick *Stercorarius maccormicki*, au large du Ghana, 25 avril 2014 (Figs. 4–5 : labbe 3, Marijke N. de Boer ; Figs. 6–7 : labbe 4, James T. Saulino)

appear sufficiently worn for an older juvenile and the plumage does not resemble that of a second-calendar-year bird in spring. Second-calendar-year (first-cycle) South Polar Skuas start primary moult later than May, but not all second-cycle or older South Polar Skuas commence their primary moult by May (Newell *et al.* 2013). We therefore conclude that skua 1 was a subadult/adult South Polar Skua.

Skua 3 (=skua 4)

Skua 3 (Figs. 4–5) lacks an obvious dark hood and again the paler, greyish nuchal collar is evident with a small whitish patch on the forehead, near the bill base. The broad tail is short without elongated central feathers. The upperparts are cold brown with paler feather edges; the paler underparts appear diffusely mottled. The dark bill and head do not appear very large for the size of the bird. The feet and legs, which were briefly visible when the bird landed on the water, appear all dark.

Like skua 1, skua 3 is larger and bulkier than Pomarine Skua. Again, a second-calendar-year Great Skua can be eliminated because of the lack

of an obvious hood or active primary moult, whilst an adult is ruled out by the lack of streaking on the upperparts. Adult South Polar Skuas (second-cycle and older) start their moult between May and September, but there is considerable individual variation as to the exact timing (Newell *et al.* 2013). The general features and build of skua 3 match those of an older South Polar Skua with a characteristically ‘cold’ look.

Discussion

Most documented records of South Polar Skuas during April/May in the Atlantic are from the west side. Kopp *et al.* (2011) studied migration patterns using geolocators attached to adults on their breeding grounds on King George Island, South Shetlands, Antarctica, finding that they migrated to the North Atlantic (three regions) and the North Pacific (two regions) or remained in the Southern Hemisphere, and that they selected the same ocean during the austral winter (or boreal summer) in subsequent years. Birds that used the Atlantic flyway migrated via a broad corridor parallel to the east coast of South America. After crossing the equator they moved north-west to

their main austral wintering area in the North Atlantic, between 7 May and 4 June, although one individual continued north-east and wintered off the coast of Mauritania (Kopp *et al.* 2011).

Return migration from the north-east Atlantic, at c.10°W, commenced on average on 5 September (range: 22 August–3 November), initially to the west coast of Africa and subsequently south-west towards Brazil (Kopp *et al.* 2011). This matches the numerous records of South Polar Skuas off Senegal in the boreal autumn (Newell *et al.* 1997), although these records generated some debate with suggestions that some birds might be immature Great or Brown Skuas (Marr *et al.* 1998), with the result that they have remained largely unconfirmed. However, Kopp *et al.* (2011) confirmed that the seas off north-west Africa are indeed an important migration corridor for South Polar Skua. The region may also serve as an austral wintering ground for the species (Kopp *et al.* 2011), as previously suggested by Newell *et al.* (1997) following the ring recovery of a South Polar Skua in Senegal in July 1991 (Bourne & Curtis 1994).

April–May is known in Ghana as the ‘warm season’ during which SSTs are relatively high (27–29°C) and a strong thermocline is formed in continental shelf waters (Koranteng 2001). Relatively little bird activity was recorded in May 2013. In the last week of April 2014 large *Sargassum* algae mats formed on the surface at frontal boundaries. This attracted seabirds, including Cory’s Shearwaters *Calonectris diomedea*, Sabine’s Gulls *Xema sabini*, Black Terns *Chlidonias niger*, Common Terns *Sterna hirundo*, Royal Terns *Thalasseus maximus*, White-tailed Tropicbirds *Phaethon lepturus*, Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus* and Pomarine Skuas.

These are the first confirmed records of South Polar Skua for Ghana and their timing (25 April and 12 May) in two consecutive years suggest that the birds regularly cross the Gulf of Guinea during their northbound migration. As these observations are ‘off the beaten track’ of birds originating from the Antarctic Peninsula (Kopp *et al.* 2011), one could speculate that these birds breed further east in Antarctica. South Polar Skua is already known to occur off the west coast of South Africa

(Hockey *et al.* 2005) and South Polar Skuas from other breeding sites in Antarctica probably also show diversity in migration routes (Kopp *et al.* 2011). One such route may partially follow the coast of West Africa, whereby birds cross the Gulf of Guinea before either crossing the Atlantic to spend the boreal summer in the north-west of the ocean or remaining off north-west Africa.

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